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TRACEY
SNELLING'S

"WOMAN ON THE RUN"

The Frist Center for the Visual Arts
Nashville, Tennessee
September 9, 2011–February 5, 2012

Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art (SECCA)
Winston–Salem, North Carolina
March 1–May 27, 2012



Fig. 1. *Psycho* © 1960 Shamley Productions Inc., Courtesy of Universal Studios Licensing LLC
Cover: Image courtesy of Tracey Snelling

CATCH HER IF YOU CAN: TRACEY SNELLING'S "WOMAN ON THE RUN"

"Do you have a vacancy?" she asks.

"Oh, we have twelve vacancies. Twelve cabins—twelve vacancies. They uh—they moved the highway," he responds.

These famous lines spoken by Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) and Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) in Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 film *Psycho* fill us with an impending sense of doom, for when Marion checks in at the Bates Motel (fig. 1) she steps into a trap from which she will not escape. A fugitive from justice, she has just embezzled \$40,000 from her employer in order to marry her debt-ridden lover and gain what she desires most: respectability. As we all know, once she retires to her room for the night, Norman spies on her through a peephole as she disrobes, and then, when she is naked and most vulnerable, stabs her to death in the shower before disposing of her car and body in a lake. She never gets the chance to return home and redeem herself as she had planned. Her soul is left in the balance.

In the 1970s, at the height of the Women's Movement, film critic Laura Mulvey and photographer Cindy Sherman (American, b. 1954) called attention to the frequency with which Hollywood movies stereotyped woman as good or bad, victim or femme fatale.¹ With "*Woman on the Run*" (figs. 4, 5, and 8), multimedia artist Tracey Snelling (American, b. 1970) acknowledges a dynamic Hollywood female character type that has generally been overlooked in feminist criticism. She focuses on women like *Psycho*'s Marion Crane, whose morality is not black and white but ambiguous.

For "*Woman on the Run*," Snelling has composed her own film noir-like melodrama. She casts herself in the starring role, which enables her to inhabit the character as Sherman does in her photographs. Snelling plays a pretty blonde named Veronica Hayden—an homage to the actress Veronica Lake, queen of film noir. The woman lives in an apartment building on the edge of town with Victor Hayden, the dark and shady businessman to whom she is married. When he turns up missing and the police presume he has been murdered, she

flees before they can question her. She then assumes one identity after another while staying in motels and drinking in dive bars, all the while looking over her shoulder and hiding behind a leopard-print scarf, wig, and sunglasses. A private eye is hot on her trail. Does her behavior, combined with the unsavory places she haunts, implicate her in a crime? Could it be instead that Victor is still alive and out to get *her*? For whom is the private eye working? Snelling deliberately leaves the labyrinthine plot she constructs open ended. It is a story full of holes, yet thanks to our own appetite for salacious detail—especially when it comes to the lives of beautiful women as our tabloid culture attests—it is hard to stop ourselves from trying to determine exactly where it all went wrong for Veronica.

Although clearly rooted in the tropes of horror and noir films, Snelling's installation also calls to mind one of the great early paintings of modern life, Édouard Manet's (French, 1832–1883) *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1881–82; **fig. 2**). Set in a well-known Paris nightclub, it presents an unclear narrative in which the virtue and identity of a beautiful barmaid are impossible to pin down because of the distortions caused by the background mirror, uncanny doubling, and the viewer's own slightly skewed point of view.² Both Manet's painting and Snelling's installation deliberately aim to foster a sense of cognitive dissonance, the uncomfortable feeling of holding two or more views simultaneously.



Fig. 2 Édouard Manet. *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, 1881–82. Oil on canvas. 37 3/4 x 51 in. The Samuel Courtauld Trust; The Courtauld Institute Gallery, London. © bpk, Berlin/ Courtauld Institute Gallery, London/ Art Resource, New York. Photo by Lutz Braun

Snelling's approach to art making can also be compared with that of the painter Edward Hopper (American, 1882–1967). Like Hopper, she is drawn to iconic vernacular architecture and envisions restless and alienated souls inhabiting the interiors. Both artists often represent buildings from an outsider's perspective and set scenes at night, so they are illuminated by the glow of artificial lights and neon signs. Hopper's own depictions of men and women in hotels, such as *Hotel Room* (1931) and *Western Hotel* (1957), are obvious precedents for Snelling's "*Woman on the Run*";³ however, it is Gas



Fig. 3. Edward Hopper. *Gas*, 1940. Oil on canvas. 26 1/4 x 40 1/4 in. Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund; The Museum of Modern Art, New York. © The Museum of Modern Art/ Licensed by SCALA/ Art Resource, New York

(1940; **fig. 3**), Hopper's painting of a lone man at a service station, that, on the whole, her work seems to owe its greatest debt. *Gas* is unusual in Hopper's oeuvre in that it is not

set in the urban core of New York City or on bucolic Cape Cod, but on the edge of a town—the last stop of civilization as night begins to fall. The margins of society and a sense of transience are similarly evoked in Snelling's work. In addition to motels, her favorite subjects are convenience stores, liquor marts, strip malls, and takeout restaurants on the outskirts of nowhere USA.⁴

Snelling typically portrays these liminal sites on a small scale. She builds shrunken architecture in which she inserts photographs and looped videos inside the windows and uses lighting, signs, and music to animate the scene. "*Woman on the Run*," however, is different in that it is a monumental installation. In fact, it is the artist's largest work to

date. It combines her characteristic tabletop sculptures (**see fig. 4**) with nearly life-sized facades, screen projections, cardboard cutouts, billboards, and comic strips. Snelling calls it three-dimensional storytelling, and at the heart of it is a motel room we can enter



Fig. 4. Tracey Snelling. "*Woman on the Run*" (detail), 2008–2011. Wood, metal, paint, fabric, neon, electroluminescent wire, LCD screens, media players, DVD players, projectors, and speakers; dimensions variable. Collection of the artist. Photo by Etienne Frossard



Fig. 5. Tracey Snelling. "Woman on the Run" (detail), 2008–2011. Photo by Etienne Frossard

(fig. 5). It is where Veronica Hayden has recently stayed and clues are strewn haphazardly across the bed, dresser, and door handle. As in Sophie Calle's (French, b. 1953) *The Hotel* (1981), we imagine and piece together the person's identity from her belongings and the mess she has left behind.

Eye-catching, brightly illuminated signs lure us into "*Woman on the Run*." We subsequently go in circles as we retrace Veronica's steps and try to solve the mystery of what motivates her actions. The changing scale and sharp angles of the architecture become increasingly disorienting, and Snelling does little to hide the fact that most of the buildings are indeed just facades. The videos around us play repeatedly, ultimately revealing nothing at all. With a wink and a nod, Snelling takes us on a delicious ride through her noir funhouse and shows us how much we need complex and unpredictable women like Veronica Hayden—if for nothing else than to make the world a more intriguing place in which to live.

Trinita Kennedy

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FUGITIVE: COLLAGE, CLUES, & ELUSION IN TRACEY SNELLING'S "WOMAN ON THE RUN"

In 1966, speaking satirically, but presciently to the accelerating influence of pop culture on the construction of identity, Andy Warhol (American, 1928–1987) quipped, “A pop person is like a vacuum that eats up everything. He’s made up from what he’s seen. Television has done it. You don’t have to read anymore.”¹ Decades later, in both her personal experience and media-based practice, Californian Tracey Snelling navigates the trickle-down affect of Hollywood narrative, artifice, and influence. Born in Oakland, raised in Manteca, and schooled in Stockton, she developed a deep-rooted kinship with the film industry and its manufacture of site through model-making, sound-stages, props, and masquerade. Drive-in movies, television, comics, and “Creature Feature” became attendant and continuing influences as Snelling translated early work in collage into a platform for life-size cinematic installation.² In the process, her surreal mash-ups of photographic enlargements, *LIFE* magazine, and period snapshots coalesced into architectural models she would further animate with kinetic elements of audio and video. Alongside comic books, video projections, performance, and scale rooms/sets, Snelling’s work has come to live in, and through a constellation of clues. Closer to the stills of a movie than the full story, “*Woman on the Run*” is a case study in the fugitive nature of this artist’s navigation of the collaged subject.

In an amalgam of femme fatales drawn from crime thrillers of the 1950s and 1960s, Snelling’s “*Woman on the Run*” simultaneously celebrates and obscures the cinematic female protagonist. In this fragmentary tale of a character’s flight from a crime she may or may not have committed, Snelling reactivates the equally unresolved feminist critique of cinema (i.e., Laura Mulvey’s oft-cited 1975 essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”). According to this position, the patriarchal paradigm—one in which “men look and women are to-be-looked-at”—determines the structure of movies where the male gaze shapes both the storyline and the stylization of his female subjects.³ And while this fetishization of the female is

meant to pacify and sexualize her, Mulvey's critical logic argues that she remains a threat because she symbolically represents castration. To combat her inherently disruptive (and dangerous) presence to the male lead and the plot's narrative integrity, we see a film noir trope (made famous by Alfred Hitchcock, [see fig. 6](#)) where the female lead is placed on the wrong side of the law—a "guilty object" who needs to be punished, objectified (in erotic close-ups), and/or saved. Snelling's fugitive female, whom she describes as "trying to escape her unwritten fate," speaks to the loose ends of this feminist dialectic, as well as their expansion into larger questions of being. In regard to the enduring problem of defining and containing the female subject's sexuality, authors Stephen Heath and Jacqueline Rose have theorized filmic females (modeled by Snelling's *Woman on the Run*), as representations of irresolution itself.⁴



Fig. 6. Alfred Hitchcock. *Rear Window*, 1954. © 1954 Universal Studios. Courtesy of Universal Studios LLC



Fig. 7. Lynn Hershman. *The Dante Hotel* (detail of room), 1972. Photograph, 8 x 10 in. © Lynn Hershman 1972

As both protagonist and perpetrator, Snelling's elusive woman is simultaneously sought and searching—looking for revised feminist geographies in a post-Hitchcock, digitally networked landscape. Playing the starring role in this, as well as other narratives that linger between exhibitionism and escapism, Snelling relishes the ability to, in her words, “try on different lives.”⁵ In so doing, she expands the chameleon-esque lineage of media-savvy performance artists from Claude Cahun (French, 1894–1954), Eleanor Antin (American, b. 1935), Martha Wilson (American, b. 1947), and Cindy Sherman to Nikki S. Lee (Korean, b. 1970), Tamy Ben-Tor (Israeli, b. 1975), and Marisa Olson (German, b. 1977). Of this esteemed group, the artist Snelling arguably shares the most in common with is Lynn Hershman (American, b. 1941) and her pioneering use of media to probe the constructs of female identity. As a case in point, Hershman's 1973 *Dante Hotel* (produced in collaboration with Eleanor Coppola) furnished a pair of real-life hotel rooms with objects that would evoke the presence of past occupants (figs. 7 and 9). Snelling uses a motel room in “*Woman on the Run*” for similar effect (fig. 5), alongside the masks, disguises, and personae that Hershman would provocatively employ for the better part of two decades. Over this time, characters

such as Roberta Breitmore and Lorna became open-ended vehicles for Hershman (and her audience) to contemplate and manipulate as they collectively moved through film, interactive video disc, and virtual worlds.⁶ Inside this agora of incomplete company, Snelling animates similar interests in the “Choose your own Adventure” design, immersive set-building, role-playing, and most importantly, the seductive ploy of staged privacy.

Hershman’s re-imagining of the *Dante Hotel* in 2007 as an online meta-archive of her life and practice speaks to the digitally-aided human desire to watch, and be watched, that author Hal Niedzviecki has dubbed “Peep Culture.”⁷ In this rapidly-expanding, Web 2.0 arena of voyeurism gone mad, Snelling’s woman can be seen projecting herself outward in an attempt to be found. From JenniCam and Justin.tv to Ustream and the We Live in Public project, the increasingly common marriage of intimacy and exhibitionism evokes French psychoanalyst



Fig. 8. Tracey Snelling. “Woman on the Run” (detail), 2008–2011. Photo by Etienne Frossard

Jacques Lacan's notion of "extimacy." Theorizing the interdependency of interior and exterior "selves," his observation of a projected (rather than preserved) private life resonates through the 1996 book *The Psychology of Cyberspace* and author John Suler's description of "online disinhibition." In this frontier space where everyone is competing for the attention of everyone else, Niedzviecki highlights "the insatiable desire for the secret [that] turns what is hidden into a precious commodity."⁸ Casting reservations, shame and caution aside, a user's allegiance to a blogosphere demanding ever more frequent and revealing details creates a forum where, Niedzviecki elaborates, "the same secret that isolates can also be a source of connection."⁹ Across an enigmatic array of personal belongings, abandoned rooms, media reports and "life highlights," Snelling's "*Woman on the Run*" lives this contradiction. Known only to us through her purported sins, this woman leaves a trail of clues for us to conjure her





Fig. 9. Lynn Hershman. *The Dante Hotel* (detail), 1972–73. Site specific installation, dimensions variable. © Lynn Hershman

true self—much like the posts, photos, and video clips scattered across the cyberscape by a semi-anonymous population of online citizens.

In an increasingly fractured society where one’s self-worth can be counted in numbers of subscribers, followers, and Facebook “friends,” the same secret that could end freedom and erase limits becomes a plea to be apprehended, acknowledged, and understood. Snelling’s ambivalent woman embodies a cultural condition where the basic human needs of food, air, and shelter are now paralleled by the longing, she observes, “to feel wanted, important, and heard.”¹⁰ The fact that this surrogate woman remains eternally on the run—fugitive and elusive despite her trail of clues, traces, and unspoken desires to be found—speaks to a place outside the possibility of identification. As the human nexus of a narrative, installation, and environment that remain equally contingent, the pieces of this metaphoric microcosm—once assembled—no longer produce a whole.

Steven Matijcio
 Curator
 Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art (SECCA)

NOTES:

CATCH HER IF YOU CAN: Tracey Snelling's "Woman on the Run":

1. For a collection of Laura Mulvey's essays, see *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989). On Cindy Sherman's photographs and films, see Amanda Cruz, "Movies, Monstrosities, and Masks: Twenty Years of Cindy Sherman," in *Cindy Sherman: Retrospective* (New York, Thames & Hudson, Inc., 1997), pp. 1–18.
2. See the seminal study by T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life* (New York, 1984); and now the essays in *Twelve Views of Manet's Bar*, edited by Bradford R. Collins (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).
3. On Hopper's hotels, see Vivien Fried, *Art and the Crisis of Marriage: Edward Hopper and Georgia O'Keeffe* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 75–78; *Western Motel, Edward Hopper and Contemporary Art* (Nuremberg: Verlag für moderne Kunst, 2008).
4. For the artist's oeuvre, see *tracey snelling: Ten Years* (San Francisco: Rena Brandsten Gallery, 2011). Chinese buildings and buildings in Chinatowns in the United States are other favorite subjects of the artist not explored here.

FUGITIVE: Collage, Clues, & Elusion in Tracey Snelling's "Woman on the Run":

1. Andy Warhol, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 1966, quoted in Hal Niedzviecki, *The Peep Diaries: How We're Learning to Love Watching Ourselves and Our Neighbors* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2009), p. 21.
2. Tracey Snelling, "5 Questions with Hans Op De Beeck," in *tracey snelling: Ten Years*, p. 3.
3. Constance Penley, "A Certain Refusal of Difference: Feminist Film Theory," in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, edited by Brian Wallis (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), p. 376.
4. Jacqueline Rose, "Paranoia and the Film System," *Screen* 17, no. 4 (Winter 1976–77), p. 85. Commenting on the connotations (and implications) of the female fugitive in Hollywood film, Rose writes: "What is central here is that cinema appears as an apparatus which tries to close itself off as a system of representation, but that is always a certain refusal of difference, of any troubling of the system, *an attempt to run away from that moment of difference*, and to bind it back into the logic or perfection of the film system itself." (my italics).
5. Snelling, p. 3.
6. It is interesting to note that many of the icons featured in the interactive video disc where one chooses the "adventure" of Hershman's agoraphobic surrogate Lorna, consist of floating, disconnected body parts (e.g., mouth, eyes). This talisman-like displacement of female forms speaks to feminist charges of objectification in Hollywood cinema, the fracture of narrative flow, as well as Snelling's penchant for leaving traces of her characters' identities as clues.
7. The full title of Hershman's 2007 interactive website (built in the online virtual format of Second Life) is *The Hotel that Time Built: The Regenerated Dante Hotel, Phase 1*. Niedzviecki's insightful 2009 book is *The Peep Diaries: How We're Learning to Love Watching Ourselves and Our Neighbors*.
8. Niedzviecki, p. 23.
9. Ibid., p. 25.
10. Snelling, p. 3.

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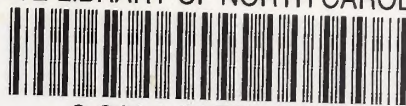
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The Frist Center for the Visual Arts is supported in part by:



SECCA is an operating entity of the North Carolina Museum of Art, an agency of the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources. SECCA is also a funded partner of The Arts Council of Winston-Salem and Forsyth County. SECCA receives additional funding from the James G. Hanes Memorial Fund.



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